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Kennedy Campaign Comes to Bowling Green in October 1960

By Jonathan Jeffrey

After eight years of Republicans controlling the White House, the Democrats in 1960 were banking on a fresh new face to rejuvenate their party and reclaim the presidency. John Fitzgerald Kennedy (JFK), their youthful candidate possessed many qualities considered essential for a strong contender: he was a veteran, he was a U.S. Senator, he was young and zestful, he came from a powerful and politically connected family, and had a strikingly handsome visage. But for many, particularly those from the South, Kennedy had some strikes against him: he was a distinct northerner with a Boston accent, he possessed liberal fiscal tendencies, and he was Catholic. Still, he and his supporters had persuaded Democrats that he could win by campaigning for change.

Even as late as the second week in October 1960—less than one month from the election—Richard M. Nixon, the Republican candidate, held a slight lead in polls. Strategists believed several key Northern and Midwestern industrial states could sway the election to either side. Kentucky was not one of those key states, but Kennedy and the Democrats viewed the Commonwealth's ten electoral votes as important. Kennedy, his running mate Lyndon Baines Johnson, and several of their family members canvassed the state frequently that fall. Kennedy, himself visited Louisville, Lexington, Bowling Green and Paducah in one two-week period; the last three cities he visited on Saturday, October 8th.

In late-summer 1960, Democratic Party leaders planned for JFK, accompanied by Mrs. Kennedy, to make a quick salvo of visits in the Commonwealth during early-October. Although rumors flew around for several weeks in the late-summer about a potential visit to Bowling Green, townspeople, other than a few key Democratic operatives, didn't get the official word until the local paper announced it on September 13th. It had been nearly thirty years since FDR had stopped at the city's L&N depot to give a stump speech for Senatorial candidate Alben Barkley and it had been a full forty years since Democrat and presidential candidate James Cox had given a campaign oration in their fair city. Local Democrats felt that the city had long been

overlooked in the campaigns of national candidates, and the paper noted that the “scheduling of Kennedy’s speech...followed extensive negotiations.”

The local paper announced October 6th as the visit’s official date, which was changed when the presidential debate schedule was released. Because the second debate was planned for Friday, October 7th, the Kentucky visit was rescheduled for Saturday, October 8th. Due to Mrs. Kennedy’s pregnancy, she would not be a part of the contingent. Commonwealth Attorney and chairman of the Bowling Green JFK visit, Morris Lowe, expressed pleasure with the adjustment. “We are extremely happy with the change,” said Lowe, “because we believe more people will be able to see and hear Senator Kennedy” on a Saturday as opposed to a weekday. Lowe predicted a huge local crowd supplemented by caravans that would arrive from every county in Kentucky’s 2nd Congressional district. He promised that “no stone will be left unturned in an effort to give Senator Kennedy and the entire Democratic ticket a resounding majority in the November 8th general election.” This was a tall order, considering the fact that although Warren County typically leaned Democratic, it had voted for Eisenhower in the past two presidential elections.

Only days prior to the visit, Dan Ogden, an advance representative of the candidate, met with the local committee to iron out details. On October 8th, Kennedy was scheduled to fly first to Lexington and give a morning address, re-board his plane and land at the Bowling Green airport, proceed via motorcade to City Hall and deliver his speech, get back into his car and proceed to the Kentucky Colonel Motel where he would eat lunch and rest, return to the car and advance to the airport from which he would fly to Paducah for another appearance. His time in Bowling Green would be approximately two hours and thirty minutes. An itinerary of the day’s events survives and includes every choreographed detail; it also included an alternate plan to hold the event in the Bowling Green High School gym in case of rain.

Finally October 8th arrived, full of sunshine and promise. Kennedy, slightly late, was greeted at the Bowling Green airport by 300 well-wishers including Congressman William H. Natcher, who introduced him to a slew of local dignitaries as well as Miss Kentucky Alice Chumley and B.C. Hayden, a 92-year-old, life-long Democrat, who the itinerary noted “will be in a wheel chair.” The candidate then entered the motorcade’s fifth vehicle, a red Oldsmobile

convertible loaned by Bettersworth Motor Company and driven by City Treasurer William F. Scates. He was accompanied in the car by event chairman Morris Lowe and Police Sergeant Wayne Constant. The motorcade consisted of sixteen vehicles, including several buses for members of the press, with state police cruisers at the start and finish. At City Hall, the candidate disembarked, walked through the building, and ambled out the front door onto the grandstand.

Surrounded by local and state politicians, the candidate faced one of the largest crowds ever assembled in Bowling Green for a political speech. Papers estimated the crowd at 5,000. One child who attended the event was awed by the teeming crowd and was surprised to look up and see grown men with their legs dangling from the trees in the courthouse lawn across the street. She also recalled how well the large speakers that were strategically located in trees and on trucks amplified the speech so that everyone could hear the candidate.

Several crowd members remember the speech as rather typical campaign broiler plate, but they were surprised at the delivery. This was no Southerner speaking to them, and one young girl pondered if anyone could really understand what this handsome young man was saying in his distinct Boston accent, although she admitted that he spoke in a slow, deliberate cadence. Before JFK left the platform, Bowling Green mayor, Robert Graham, presented him with a large country ham which displayed a fine patina of mold. Kennedy jocularly accepted the token and told the crowd: "If you say it's good, then I'll eat it." Before leaving that day, Kennedy slipped Graham his home address and asked him to send Jackie directions on how to prepare the Kentucky delicacy.

After the speech Kennedy returned to the red Oldsmobile. As the car pulled away from the rear of City Hall, the Democratic candidate heard the plaintive cry of "Daddy, Daddy!" When JFK asked Police Sergeant Wayne Constant if this was his daughter, Constant assented. At that, Kennedy turned to her, beamed his iconic smile, and yelled: "Hi Susie!" Even 50 years later, Susie (Constant) Paschal recalls the moment lucidly and said that shortly afterwards she began to weep. The motorcade then proceeded to the Kentucky Colonel Motel, where the candidate dined on a hot dog and had a few minutes to rest in his room while the press corps was entertained in the hotel's upscale dining room.

Close to 12:30 the motorcade reassembled to head to the Bowling Green airport. En route the procession skirted the city's municipal golf course where an inordinate number of women golfers happened to be on the fairways. When they saw the motorcade, they dropped their clubs and rushed to Kennedy's vehicle; one woman was so excited about seeing him, she actually jumped into the automobile and had to be extricated by police. This had already happened to Kennedy several times on the campaign trail. Women were attracted to this handsome, charismatic gentleman. One girl who got Kennedy's autograph at the Bowling Green airport that day recalled years later: "JFK was gorgeous, one of the most beautiful men I've ever seen. At that point I didn't know they made them like that. A revelation. Sandy hair, a golden tan, sea green eyes. Photos don't do him justice."

A crowd of approximately 500, with a strong contingent of Western Kentucky State College co-eds, saw the candidate off from the airport. Bowling Greeners remember Kennedy's visit with fondness, and they grow sentimental when they ponder his subsequent election, brief but eventful presidency, and his untimely assassination. Did his visit make a perceivable difference in election results in Bowling Green? No, Nixon carried Warren County with 54.9% of the vote and carried Kentucky with 53.6% of the vote, but Kennedy was able to pull out some decisive wins in those key Northern and Midwestern states to win the presidency. When he visited Bowling Green, Kentucky on Saturday, October 8th, he definitely won some hearts.